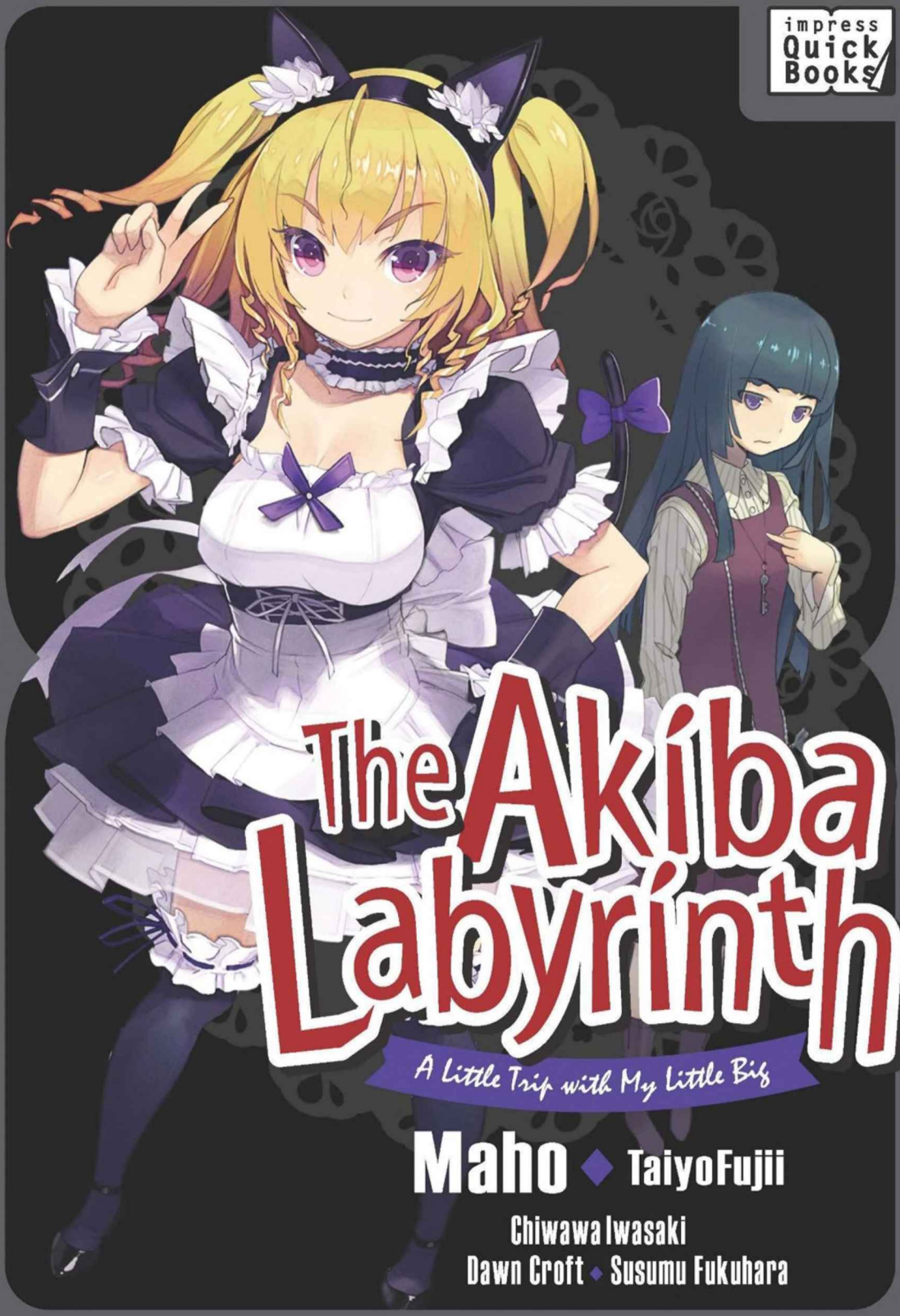
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Books
The Akiba Labyrinth
A Little Trip with My Little Big
Maho ◆ TaiyoFujii
Chiwawa Iwasaki
Dawn Croft ◆ Susumu Fukuhara

This book is the English translation of a Japanese light novella.

We have translated this novella with the intent of spreading Japan’s unique light novella culture to English speaking readers. In order to spread the world view of light novellas further we have collaborated with the translation website Conyac (https://conyac.cc/en/), which connects professional and aspiring translators with those who need translations.

Together with Conyac we held a translation contest and selected two translators who were familiar with not only the language, but also Japan’s unique cultural aspects that appear within the light novella.

On that note, please enjoy "The Akiba Labyrinth: A Little Trip with My Little Big".

Glossary

Akiba

A common shortened way of referring to Akihabara. In this story, "AKIBA" refers to the maid cafe and special world to which the main characters are spirited away.

Big

An interpretation of the Japanese title suffix "senpai". It is usually given to upperclassmen in school, but can also refer to anyone with a higher rank in the workplace or other organization.

Bullet train

Known in Japanese as the shinkansen, bullet trains are the famous high-speed trains offering service to Japan's major cities. From Tokyo station it only takes a few hours to get almost anywhere in Japan on a shinkansen.

-chan

A Japanese suffix that is added to names to denote cuteness and endearment to the speaker.

Cosplay

A portmanteau of "costume" and "play", cosplay is a performance art in which the participants dress up as characters from anime, video games,

film, and other media.

List of Tokyo wards mentioned

Akihabara, Shibuya, Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, Ueno.

Little

An interpretation of the Japanese title suffix "kouhai", or underclassman. The opposite of "senpai".

Maid cafe

A type of cosplay restaurant in which the waitresses dress in maid costumes, act as servants, and treat the patrons as if they are the master or mistress in a private home.

Photo:schatzkiste

http://schatz-kiste.net/

6-5-11 Sotokanda Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo JAPAN

Access：

(JR Line) 10 minutes walk from Akihabara Station Electric Town Exit.

(Ginza Line) 2 minutes walk from Suehirocho Station No.4 Exit.

(Chiyoda Line) 5 minutes walk from Yushima Station No.6 Exit.

*Second Tuesday is Closed.

Otaku

Commonly translated as "nerd" or "geek", an otaku originally referred to men with an obsessive hobby. Today, it is used primarily for those obsessed with video games, anime, manga, and so on, and can be applied to women and girls as well.

Spell of Deliciousness

A common act maids preform at maid cafes as part of the service. The maid waves her hands about making cute gestures and claims it adds to the flavor of any dish.

Tokyo Skytree

A broadcasting and observation tower in Tokyo's Sumida ward. It is the tallest structure in Japan.

Yamanote Line

The famous circular train line that encompasses metropolitan Tokyo. Most of Tokyo's major wards can be accessed by the Yamanote Line.

The Akiba Labyrinth: A Little Trip with My Little Big

By Maho

contents

Chapter 1: Some Things Never Change

Chapter 2: Just One Destination in Mind

Chapter 3: A Sense of Foreboding

Chapter 4: The Girl with Kitten Ears

Chapter 5: The Discussion

Chapter 6: A Guided Tour

Chapter 7: A Question of Value

Chapter 8: A Question of Cost

Chapter 9: Our Favorite Thing

Chapter 10: The Encounter

Chapter 11: Bittersweet

Chapter 12: The Game

Chapter 13: The Reason

Chapter 14: The Loser

Chapter 15: The Perfect Balance

Chapter 16: Contemplation

Chapter 17: Big

Chapter 18: Homeward Bound

Chapter 1: Some Things Never Change

Tiny, twinkling eyes. Two tiny hands clasped together. This petite girl is a year ahead of me in school, so I affectionately refer to her as my "Big". Opening her tiny kitten mouth, little Big begins to speak.

"If you could choose between a girl with big breasts and a girl with small breasts, which would it be?"

Again? This girl is a master of pointless, irrelevant questions.

But to answer her…yeah, I'll take the girl with big boobs.

As the saying goes, better too much than not enough. Anything you can't get from small breasts you can easily get from enormous ones...

And I doubt it would be hard to round up a few men to back me up on this.

"........."

But I have to keep my thoughts to myself. I could never say this to my little Big, who is peeking over trying to read the guilty smile flashing across my lips.

One slip of the tongue, and she'd grate my head like a radish on her washboard chest.

"What…are you picturing me in some sort of compromising situation?" she demands.

"What? No way." I shoot back.

"You're fantasizing about my flat chest growing enormous."

"That's ridiculous." I tell her. "Everybody at school knows I have Flat Chest Fever."

"Well that's a charming thing to be known for," she scoffs. "Anyway, forget it."

And with that, little Big sits back into her seat. She's so tiny that it threatens to swallow her. Her little feet are completely off the floor. She looks like she needs a booster seat.

Better stop though. I don't even dare joke about it.

"I've really been thinking about this." Interrupting my thoughts, she goes on.

"You may love an enormous rack, but there's really no difference between big breasts and small ones. They're exactly the same body part either way. Whether they're big or small is just a footnote…a trivial aside.

Nothing more than a statistical discrepancy. You can't argue with that logic."

"Big, you're talking nonsense. No difference? You've got to be kidding! There's a world of difference between big breasts and small ones. Even the thought of comparing them is ridiculous. It's like comparing coffee served at a fancy coffee shop with the canned crap they sell at convenience stores. It's an insult to the cafe owners."

"So you're saying my breasts are like coffee cans."

"Not even close! About the size of crushed coffee cans, actually."

"I'd strangle you right now if we weren't on the train."

It's a holiday, but a lot of people are still dozing off on the early morning bullet train. She's right about not attacking me. It really would be a childish thing to do in a train car.

I'll give her that. My Big always knows when to mind her manners. She may have the tiny, flat figure of a child, but she certainly doesn't have a childish mind.

That is, except for randomly asking people about boobs.

"Breasts aside, you know Tokyo is just another place on Honshu, right? The same major island as our hometown. It's still Japan. I bet the people there are not much different. I mean…I get that you're excited about going and all, but there's no reason to keep drooling over that travel magazine."

And with that, she snatches it away from me.

Did I really look like I was drooling on it?

"You're the one that's been looking forward to this Tokyo trip, you know," I say back.

"I am looking forward to it. It's your present to me for my high school graduation. What's not to look forward to?"

Distractedly rolling the travel magazine in her tiny hands, she continues. "But I don't go around advertising it. I'd hate people to think I'm just some country girl all starry-eyed over her first trip to the big city."

That's my Big…always careful about how she comes off to people.

"Take a piece of advice from someone a year older than you," she tells me. "Don't jump off the train yelling BIG CITY HERE I COME!!!, ok?"

Our bullet train flies into Tokyo Station with blinding speed and not a

minute late. Little Big steps onto the platform, throws out her tiny arms, and shouts,

"BIG CITY HERE I COME!!!"

She's a woman who knows how to embrace a clich?.
And keeps the story pretty predictable.

So with that, my little trip with my little Big begins.

Chapter 2: Just One Destination in Mind

Dragging me along with her tiny hand, Big crisscrosses her way across every corner of the capital city.

Here we are, on our two-day, one-night trip to Tokyo.
Just me and my little Big.

On the first day, we plan to march through all of the usual tourist spots.

The bullet train drops us off at Tokyo Station just before noon, and from there we head straight to the Yamanote Line and hit Shibuya, Shinjuku and Ikebukuro. By the time we get to Ueno Station, evening starts to fall.

But these are no dark country roads. Here in the city, night glitters as bright as day.
We eat dinner at a restaurant overlooking the rail lines.

"I had a great time today. It's been so long since I just let myself go wild like this," she says.

"I'm glad, Big, but you're getting a bit too carried away. I think you

took it a little too far today."

"Oh, give me a break. I'm not you. I didn't go that crazy."

"Who was the one freaking out about the skyscrapers, jumping around pointing at them like a maniac?"

"Who would do that? You? That is crazy."

"Who was hopping around like a little kid watching the trains rush by one after another?"

"Sounds like an immature idiot. Probably you."

Who was so afraid of getting swallowed by the crowd that they kept chanting "…stay close, don't get lost…stay close, don't get lost…" like some kind of weird mantra?

"Some scared little baby. Definitely you."

"It was all you, Big."

I don't see how you can get more country girl than that.

As she's talking, Big cuts her steak neatly into tiny strips that will fit

into her tiny little mouth.

Must be some good quality steak if she can cut right through it with her tiny little muscles.

Proud of having spoiled her, I start to cut my steak into strips too.

"By the way," I mention, "we never got to Tokyo Skytree. Didn't you want to see that too?"

"You know I'm afraid of heights, right?" she shoots back, munching her steak.

Her face has a slack expression…I guess because the food is so good.

Personally, I would've liked to go to Skytree…if only to see Big get all freaked out up at the top. In any case, she seems to be enjoying her fancy steak. This will have to do for now.

"Tokyo Skytree, Tokyo Tower…there are a million places to go in the city. I had the time of my life in the Shinjuku Subcenter, and think the day really couldn't have gone better. But I can't wait for tomorrow. Tomorrow is the whole reason for our trip."

"That's it. Today was just a warm-up. Tomorrow's the real deal."

It's true. Our little trip was planned with just one destination in mind.

"They say you can find almost anything you want there," Big tells me.

"But," I join in, "they also say that there's so much to find, you might not find anything at all."

"They say that anyone and everyone is there."

"Some probably go in and never come out," I say.

"They say it's like another world."

"Like being lost in a dream."

"I've heard people call it a holy place," she says.

"I've heard people call it hell."

"Do you think we'll find demons there?" she asks.

"We might find serpents," I reply.

So tomorrow is the big day.
My little Big and I will finally go to Akihabara.

Chapter 3: A Sense of Foreboding

"What the hell?! Two beds? Are you out of your mind?!"

Big is flipping out.

"No," I counter, "you're the one who's out of your mind. Two travelers need two beds. Obviously."

"That's ridiculous! How are we supposed to sleep together?"

"We don't."

We're back in our hotel room after dinner at the restaurant. What I really should have done was book two rooms…but there was just no way I could afford it with everything else.

She didn't look upset when I told her.

Of course, if I'm honest…

I mean really honest with myself…

I guess that I might have…maybe…wondered if we might take our relationship just a little farther on this trip…

"You coward!" She lays into me. "You don't need to drop your pants for me to know you have a flea wiener. I'd need a microscope just to see the damn thing!"

"Big, I'm sorry, but could you keep it down a little?"

Even a guy like me has some sense of propriety.

Well…no. That's probably just an excuse.

Maybe I really am scared.

Scared that I might actually hurt her.

I'm not even sure if Big really means what she's saying.

She didn't look upset when I told her about the one room, so that could at least mean she feels safe around me… right?

Maybe it was "safe" she was thinking when the word "coward" came out of her mouth.

Safe. But safe… emotionally? Or safe…physically?

Nope, I still just don't understand this girl. What is my Big really thinking?

What is she really thinking about me?

And what do I really think about her?

One thing I do know…all this thinking is definitely getting me nowhere.

"Big, we should get some sleep for tomorrow," I tell her. "Why don't you take a nice hot bath?"

"Good idea," she replies, "…and then you'll join me at some point, I presume?"

She flashes me a knowing smile.
Unfortunately, that child's body of hers is anything but sexy.

"I might…if I feel like it," I hesitate.

"Seriously? Zero interest?"

And with that, she flips me off and disappears into the bathroom.

Before I know it, her clothes come flying out from behind the door. "Here you go, chicken shit! Have fun jacking off with these!"

Thrusting her arm out with the insult, she jabs a finger angrily at the pile of clothes before slamming the bathroom door.

Come to think of it though, she was probably jabbing that finger at me.

Telling myself it's because I'm a gentleman, I begin to fold her clothes and neatly put them away.

…oh boy…

One little touch of her underwear and my whole body begins to shake.

Little Big's striped panties…still warm from her body. My heart starts pounding…

Maybe she's right. Maybe I am just a chicken shit after all.

I flip on the TV to try to calm myself down. As I stare blankly into the screen, little Big emerges from her bath.

"Whew! That felt great!" she exclaims.

My Big plops on the bed with a slack expression, as if the heat of the hot bath had nearly melted her.

Her long hair is wrapped up in a bath towel, giving her a completely different look.

I should note that she already has her pajamas on…
Her favorite cat pajamas.
And they make her look pretty childish.

"Go soak in the bath,"she says. Adding ironically, "It's already been steeped in my special essences."

I pretend not to care and make my way to the tub.

After sweating it out in Big's "special essences", I return to the room to find her spread-eagle across her bed, fast asleep and breathing deeply.

"Ugh!"I exclaim.

She looks so disheveled that it just comes out.

I guess that's what happens when you trek across Tokyo getting yourself worked up all day.
She must have really been worn out.

I hope she sleeps well so that she's fully charged for tomorrow.

I crawl into my bed too, switching off the lights she left on.
I'm pretty tired myself.

"……"

Just as I'm dozing off, teetering along the thin line between dreams and reality, I feel someone creep stealthily into my bed.

"Big…?"I mutter. "What are you doing?"
I keep my eyes closed in response to her advances.

This tiny little creature can only be my Big.
Her voice is faint and sleepy in my ear.

"Let's sleep together,"she says.
It has none of its usual dignity and poise.

"…don't try anything funny, Big,"I warn her.

"Fine, give me your hand then,"she whispers.

She feels around for it under the covers, and gently rests her small, soft

palm on mine like a little marshmallow.

Again I hear her faint, sleepy voice.

"I…"she starts, hesitantly. "I hate the thought of graduating.
I'm so worried about it.
Because once I do, I won't be able to see you again."

"You know how shy I am around strangers,"she continues.
"I'm really scared to be apart from you."
"This trip is so wonderful.
If I weren't graduating, these happy days could go on and on…"

She slows her speech, carefully emphasizing every word. "I…really…don't…want…to graduate."
"Because…"she trails off, "I…am…your…"

The next thing I know, she's fast asleep.

Graduation…

Big will graduate high school.
She's just a year older than me.

Come April, she'll be a university student and I'll be a senior.

And this little trip is my gift to her before she goes.

"I also hate the idea of being apart from you, little Big,"I whisper back.

But I'm only muttering to myself.

Chapter 4: The Girl with Kitten Ears

"I'm no otaku fangirl, you know. So what if I love anime and manga and video games? Or feel like putting on strange, frilly cosplay dresses now and then. That doesn't make me an otaku."

"I'm pretty sure that's the modern definition of an otaku," I say back.

My Big and I are on an early morning Yamanote train.

During the short ride to Akihabara, she chatters away with nervous excitement.

"But the word otaku sounds so negative…like you're some kind of freak. If you say you like surfing, you sound like a normal person…but once you say you're a surfing otaku, people start to think you're locked up in your room all day even though it's an outdoor sport."

"Yeah," I admit, "I guess I see what you mean."

The train arrives at Akihabara, cutting our conversation short.

My Big and I step onto the platform. This is finally it…Akihabara Station.

"Woah!" My Big can hardly contain herself. "We made it! We're in Akihabara! Do you realize that? Akihabara! It's like stepping onto a different planet…just like they say! The air, I can feel it! Like it's charged with the essence of Akihabara itself! Isn't it incredible?"

Is this the same person who was telling me that Tokyo was no different from our hometown?

Man, if this is what she's like on the platform, she may just die of shock once she passes through the turnstile.

"Behold!" she announces dramatically. "Pillars with LCD screens! Ads flying by left and right! Oh my god! It's amazing, isn't it?"

"Hey Big, chill out. You're acting like you've never seen a TV before."

She completely ignores my attempts to calm her down. She paces up and down the streets of Akihabara, getting more and more excited.

I'm pretty much out of things to say.

As she drags me along, my thoughts drift back to the night before.

Could it be that she's scared of graduating?

I'm a bit worried about her, actually. I'd never seen her so vulnerable

before.

Although, judging from the way she's acting now, I'm probably worrying for nothing. Here she is taking yesterday's Shinjuku craziness to a whole new level.

Still…I am starting to get a weird feeling about this.

Maybe she's just taking this opportunity to really enjoy herself for once. Maybe this little graduation trip represents the end of high school for her, so she wants to be sure to make the most of it…

After making the rounds of the most popular anime and underground manga shops, my little Big seems to have worn herself out.

"Whew! I'm beat!" she announces.

"That doesn't surprise me," I say.

"I'm getting a little hungry," she says. "Oh, look! It's already hours past lunch time!"

She sticks out her watch, which tells me it's around 3 p.m. Way past lunch.

Wow. Time really did fly. We only have a few hours before we have

to catch the bullet train back home.

Our little trip is nearly over.

"Why don't we grab a late lunch somewhere nearby?" I suggest.

"Meeeow? Looking for the purr-fect place to rest, purr-haps?"

She comes out of nowhere.
Completely out of the blue.
And plants herself right in between me and my little Big.
Seriously…absolutely no sign of her until this exact moment.
Just materializes out of thin air.

Turning towards me, the corners of her mouth spread into a playful, kittenish grin.

"Allow me to escort you to the purr-fect place! A delightful and durr-matically distinctive meow-gical maid cafe!"

There we are, face-to-face with this strange girl.
Right in the middle of Akihabara.

Heaven or hell, this is it.
No demons… No snakes...

But we did just meet some weird girl with cat ears.

Chapter 5: The Discussion

Her breasts were big.

And as an added bonus, she had beautiful, soft hair waving gently down her back. Plus two pointy black kitten ears peeking through at the top of her head.

Her eyes were round and smiling like acorns. And out from under her frilly maid's apron peeked a swaying tail tied with a bright red bow.

Those were all great things about her. The huge boobs in particular, though.

That's what's worth mentioning, anyway.

I mean?I've got to be honest.

The girl had enormous tits.

"What do you think you're doing, staring at her chest like that?!" There goes my Big.

"Oh, don't be so hard on me, Big. They're not the sort of breasts you see every da?OOF."

Before I can finish, Big punches me square in the stomach.

No joke?it hurts. I double over and stumble forward.

Little Big leans in and whispers softly in my ear.

"Listen, who this weird girl, anyway? Where the hell did she come from?"

"I have no idea, Big," I respond. "Maybe she's part of some publicity stunt. You know?like those cosplay girls handing out flyers for maid cafes. Haven't you seen them?"

"Ah, those girls. They looked so sketchy I just ignored them."

"They're not that sketchy…I mean, it's not like they're selling porn or anything. Anyway, what do you say? We came all this way. Wanna try out a maid cafe?"

"A maid cafe? But…we might get lured into some creepy situation in the toilet! Or…or…taken underground and forced to work for slave wages or?that's the way these stories always end up, right?"

"Big, you read way too much manga."

The kitten-eared girl just watches us go back and forth, smiling.

Is she waiting for an answer?

It's hard to imagine that innocent smile leading us into some sketchy toilet encounter or an underground work camp.

"I'm OK to go," I tell Big. "What about you?"

"You're OK to go? You just want to ogle her chest!"

". . . . . ."

She's not entirely off base there. I decide I'd better keep my mouth shut.

"A maid cafe!" she goes on. "And you want me to just sit there while you drool on yourself and fantasize about other women, I suppose?"

My little Big can be pretty harsh sometimes.

"Don't you know that those cafes are total rip-offs?" She was on a roll now.

"You don't have to worry about that, Big. I have plenty of money and it's not like they're going to charge us hundreds of thousands of yen for

lunch."

"It's not the amount I'm worried about! I just hate that they make money by scamming people!"

"It's no different than a tip, Big." I explain. "They call you "Master" and "Mi'Lady" and treat you like royalty. It's a brand-new experience. Don't you think it'll be fun?"

"…but they already call me 'Little Princess' at home."

Couldn't argue with her there.
She's the daughter of a pretty wealthy big-name family.

I often forget about it because she doesn't walk around flaunting it and rarely spends a lot of money.

"This girl is nothing like the maids at your house," I tell her. "Just look! Do your maids have tails and cat ears? This is why we came to Akihabara, isn't it? To have some kind of crazy adventure?"

I guess you have a point there," she concedes. "Fine. Let's see where this cat-eared girl takes us."

And with that, little Big takes a step back, silently insisting that I work

things out with the kitten-eared girl on my own.

"So…" I begin, "will you show us to your maid cafe then?"

My question seems to amuse her, and she breaks into a huge smile.

Apron fluttering and huge tits swaying, she cocks her left hand on her hip and strikes a baffling pose…flashing the peace sign at her cheek as she opens her mouth in a playful jeer.

"Meeewww got it!" I'm the kitty maid Katie from the Kitty Cat Caf?, and it is my purr-fect pleasure to show you the way!"

No joke. This was one weird girl.

Chapter 6: A Guided Tour

"Well then, let's get mew-ving!" Katie purrs and mews as she marches us through the streets like a regular tour guide.

Deciding to just go with the flow, I walk obediently behind.
My Big follows, clutching the hem of my shirt for some reason.

"You're making it hard to keep up with her," I protest.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you not to go anywhere with strangers?" she fires back.

"Well yeah, but…"

"You know Alice followed a rabbit and got lost in Wonderland. I wonder if it's such a good idea to follow this cat around," she continues.

"I doubt she's leading us into Wonderland, Big."

With that, Katie whirls around and stares at us, jumping right into our conversation.

"Meow-ha-ha-ha!" she laughs. "Akihabara is already a purr-fectly

strange wonderland, don't mew think?"

Packing backwards now, both hands behind her back, she flashes us her wide Cheshire grin.

"Is this Mister and Mi'Lady's first trip to Akihabara?" she purrs.

"Um…yeah," I reply, "We thought we'd take a little trip to Tokyo."

"I see! Well that's just meow-velous then, isn't it!"

Katie places her hand coyly over her mouth and looks back and forth between us before turning back around. We start walking again.

What's so marvelous about that?

Forget the strangeness of Akihabara…this cat girl was more than strange enough!

We continue walking through the crowded streets when suddenly Katie veers left towards a deep alley.

I immediately get the sense that a human presence has disappeared. Little Big tugs on my shirt.

"So you're into girls who purr and talk like cats, then?"

"I dunno," I reply. "I mean…it's definitely something different."

"What if I got into that sort of character?"

"Big, you're adorable just the way you are."

I feel an open-handed smack across my back.

Instinctively I whirl around. Big is standing there with her head down, ears bright red.

Huh. I guess I really embarrassed her.

Cute.

Big and I go back and forth, all the while being led deeper and deeper into the alley. There's not another soul around.

We walk a bit further before Katie again changes direction…this time turning right. The scenery changes completely.

Small shops line both sides of this new passageway. They seem to be selling all kinds of electronic gadgets. I don't recognize a single one.

Still, it seems like the kind of place I've seen before…maybe in a

photo or something.

Akihabara was originally an electronics center, so it's no surprise that they still carry all kinds of gadgets and parts that the average person doesn't know about. It's a bit like walking through a time capsule left behind in a different era.

Like time never passed here at all.

Actually, the place is starting to really grow on me.

Just as I'm getting carried away with the mystery of it all, little Big tugs on my shirt again.

"Are you sure there's going to be a maid cafe way out here?" she asks.

"Maybe we're just taking a shortcut," I offer.

She had a point though. It did seem like it was way too far. It felt like we'd been walking forever since Katie first appeared. It was no big deal to follow her, but there was no way we'd be able to make it back on our own.

I call out to our guide. "Miss Katie?"

"Meow?" She answers without turning around. "Mew don't have to be

so formal," she says. "You can call me Katie-chan."

"Miss Katie..." I repeat.

I probably shouldn't ask. But I have to. "Listen, we've walked all this way. Where is this maid cafe of yours, anyway? And where the hell are we?"

Katie finally turns back to look at me.

"What are you talking a-meowt?" She puts her hands behind her back teasingly and flashes that Cheshire grin again.

Fluttering her little apron suggestively as she wiggles her kitten ears and waves her tail, Katie peers back at us with a mocking expression.

"You said you wanted to go to A-K-I-B-A, didn't mew?"

Just then, I notice that Katie is standing in front of an enormous building. It's a classic Western-style building made of brick, looking completely out of place in the little Japanese electronics town.

"Welcome to the AKIBA maid cafe! "

Chapter 7: A Question of Value

We open the door and walk into a room just as old-fashioned as the exterior. Random objects are collected here and there, giving it the quaint, homey feel of an old-time coffee shop. Quite a few customers are already seated at the tables.

But it's the maids that really catch my eye. You can't miss them. Each one is wearing the same frilly apron that flutters about as they busily go on with their duties.

And the most amazing thing? They all have enormous tits.

Am I in paradise?
Did I die and go to heaven?

"Neow," Katie announces, "you have officially arrived in AKIBA!"

Katie grins at me wryly as if she's read my mind. Turning back towards the room, she thrusts a hand in the air.

"Attention, everyone!" she yowls. "Master and Mi'Lady have returned!"

And with that, all of the maids come to a halt and turn in unison, daintily lifting the sides of their aprons and dipping into a simultaneous curtsey as they call out a greeting.

"Welcome Home, Master and Mi'Lady!"

The way they've perfectly coordinated their movements is pretty impressive.

Big hadn't let go of my shirt for a second. I could feel her little hand tremble. I can't figure out why she's been so afraid all this time.

"And neow I will show you to your seats!"

Big and I follow Katie, weaving through a maze of tables, seated guests, and frilly French maids. Up ahead is a small table for two. Little Big and I take our seats.

The table is round and wooden. It's draped with a red tablecloth and set with a water pitcher, upturned glasses, and a brown folded menu standing on its end.

Katie arranges the glasses and pours each of us water, smiling as she speaks. "Just call me when you're ready to purr-ace your order!"

The minute our glasses are filled, Katie disappears from sight.

Big lets out a huge sigh…I think of relief.

"Phew! It seems like forever since I've sat down."

"We've been walking all day," I remind her.

"I pictured maid cafes as being all pink and tacky-cutesy, but this one is really quaint and stylish."

"I'm surprised too. I thought it would be much more of a lusty, fantasy-type anime vibe."

"What do you mean by that?" Big demands.

Looking a bit sickened at my remark, she turns the menu so I can see it.

"Let's see…" she says aloud, "omelet with fried rice and spaghetti… It's a typical Japanese cafe menu! I mean, : I'm not complaining or anything…I guess I just expected it to be more... maid cafe?ish."

"I see what you mean," I reply. "I was thinking `love-drenched maid-tastic spaghetti' or `rice omelets made just the way Master likes them'."

"I'd like to see them mix your perverted brain into that love-drenched spaghetti," Big fires back. She looks at me like something the cat dragged in.

Was it that disgusting?

"Hey Big, you know what? Whatever a maid casts her Spell of Deliciousness on will be the best thing you've ever tasted."

"Huh."

She doesn't seem the least bit interested.

"Wait…what?" Little Big tilts her head to the side. Looks like she found something interesting.

"Hey," she asks, "Do you notice anything weird here?"

"Other than the fact that it's not chock full of anime references?"

"No, you airhead."

Well, that wasn't very nice.

"Behold!" she cries out. "See? This menu has no prices!"

Chapter 8: A Question of Cost

Little Big was right. Not a single price on the menu.

"Maybe they're all market price?" I offer.

"For an omelet?" she asks. "How much can it possibly change day to day?"

Fair point. It was a typical cafe menu…no exotic fish dishes or fancy ingredients anywhere. A bunch of regular, everyday food.

The same kind of ho-hum grub we'd eat back home.

Even though Big's family has a lot of money, she never just throws it around.

"I heard about a ramen shop that lets the customers decide their own prices," I tell her.

"Really. Well that's a novel concept, but I don't think I like it. It preys on peoples' consciences."

"How much would you pay for a bowl of ramen, Big?"

"No more than 600 yen."

Nope, she definitely doesn't think like a rich girl. I'm guessing we'll be paying a bit more than that here.

"Forget your weird ramen shop," she goes on. "This has got to be one of those dirty maid cafe rip-off scams. Order from a menu with no prices and you're just asking to get hit with some ridiculous bill."

"I kind of doubt it," I say, "but if you want I'll ask someone. Should I call…a maid?"

"Meow can I help you?"

Just as I start to put my hand in the air, I hear Katie's voice come from directly behind me, scaring the crap out of me. It feels like my heart's about to jump out of my chest, but I manage to keep it together.

"Are you some kind of ninja?" I ask her. You're pretty good at popping out of nowhere."

"Ninjas, cats…we're all masters at sneaking a-meownd," she purrs.

Hands rounded like kitten paws, Katie reaches out as she slinks stealthily up to our table. Looking like a cat stalking her prey, she inches

closer to me and little Big.

"Well," she purrs, "What's your purr-easure? How may I serve mew?"

"Um…actually I think we're good for now."

That should keep us from getting tricked.

"What I means is, um…the menu? It doesn't have any prices. So we don't really know what we're going to have to pay."

"Meow-ha-ha-ha!" Katie laughs. "Master! You've no need to worry about purr-ices!"

Hands on her hips, Katie leans her face over the table, breasts swinging. Her mouth twists into a self-satisfied grin.

"We wouldn't think of charging Master and Mi'Lady," she says. "I am your obedient maid and completely at your service. Purr-ease…allow me to serve mew!"

"But…then how do you stay in business?" I ask.

Clasping her hands to her chest, Katie laughs out loud again. "Meow-ha-ha-ha! It's our purr-ace to worry about mew, not yours to worry about

us! We never charge at the AKIBA maid cafe. Instead, we ask that mew grant us just one little favor before mew leave."

"A favor?"

"Yes, Master."

Katie picks up the edges of her frilly apron and directs a curtsey towards us.

"Won't you purr-ay a little game with us after mew have finished your meal?"

Chapter 9: Our Favorite Thing

Then, before I can ask anything else, Katie disappears again… silently and without a trace.

"What in the world is she talking about, Big?" I ask. "A game instead of money?"

"I've got no idea…but I definitely have a bad feeling about this. What kind of game?"

A game instead of money. Hmm…
Some kind of new business model? I wonder.

Big speaks up. "I'll tell you one thing. I bet it's some game we have no chance of winning."

"What kind of game has no chance of winning?" I ask her. "I've heard of cafes holding rock-scissors-paper tournaments with the customers facing off against the maids. Some kind of risqu? version of it I guess. But there's no way to rig that so you can never win…"

"Well," Big suggests, "they could trick us by making us play a maid who could read hand movements a fraction of a second early. It would

seem like a fair fight, but they'd still be cheating."

"That'd be one nasty little maid."

A maid that reads hand movements? She'd have to have some kind of superhuman reaction time. Like a professional boxer or something.

"Forget the kind of game though," Big says. "What happens if we lose?"

"Well, losers probably have to pay their bill…I'm guessing that's how it works."

"It should be the other way around," she says. "Customers should pay normally, but if they happen to beat the maid at the game they get a free meal. That makes more sense, doesn't it? If I owned the place, that's how I'd do it."

Adding that she has no intention of ever owning a maid cafe, my little Big takes a sip of water.

"In any case," she goes on, "we know nothing about this game. Clearly they don't want us to know anything about it. It's pretty unsettling if you ask me."

"Well, if this is some kind of wonderland," I say, "it's no surprise that things don't make much sense. It's probably just the way it is here. But just to be safe, we'd better not go crazy ordering a bunch of things off the menu."

"Agreed. So if that's the plan…" My little Big turns back to her choices.

Running her tiny finger across the paper, she stops at something.

"Look, they have chiffon cake! How about chiffon cake?"

"Sounds great!" I reply.

"I'm going to get coffee too. You want some?"

"Katie?" I call out. "I'll have what she's having."

"Mew got it!" comes the reply.

Katie appears instantly the minute I say her name. It almost feels like I have the power to summon this kitten-eared girl at will.

"Coffee and chiffon cake for both of us," I say.

"My purr-easure," she coos back.

Promising to be back in a flash, the cat girl disappears once again.

I catch little Big smiling as she folds the menu and puts it back in its original place. She looks like she's remembering something fondly.

"Chiffon cake! I LOVE Chiffon cake. Do you know why?" she asks.

"Because it's the first thing we ate together?"

"Yes! I knew you'd remember."

I did remember.

Except I was sort of half-joking with her…

"Well," she says, "that saves me the trouble of having to get pissed off at you. I was expecting the usual thing where I have to shout 'How could you forget?!' and 'How can you not know?!' and on from there."

"Come on, Big. It's not like you to badger me."

Chiffon cake.

The first shared memory between me and my little Big.

Chapter 10: The Encounter

I love unfamiliar places.

Walking through strange streets gives me a feeling of intense joy.

New destinations full of delightful mysteries…

It's the kind of excitement that drives me.

I felt something like that when I first came to my high school, wandering around the campus at lunchtime, finding a place to hang my bag, looking for a place to eat…

And suddenly I saw…what was it?

I spotted a female student, crouching low in the bushes behind the school building.

What in the world was she doing out there all alone?

It was the very first mystery of my high school days.

Of course, the situation was nothing to start fantasizing about. If she was feeling sick or something, I needed to make sure she was OK.

With that thought in mind, I called out to her.

"Are you OK?"

"Eee..."

She gave out a little cry and inched herself a bit straighter. She seemed to be in shock, this girl.

She had a red ribbon pinned to her school uniform, which told me she was an upperclassman.

But she was so tiny.

She didn't look like a high school girl…though she didn't exactly look like she was in elementary school, either.

The girl had standoffish eyes half hidden behind her long, silky-smooth hair. They had a tinge of fright about them.

But more importantly, she had really tiny tits.

"Umm…" I stammered.

What should I do?

All I wanted to do was talk to her, but she was glaring at me like I was

some kind of disgusting pervert.

I'd never been in this situation before.

As I was trying to come up with my next move, I noticed that there was a cat sitting beside her.

"You've got a cat there," I said.

The girl gave a slight nod and began to speak in a tiny voice.

"The cat…doesn't look well," she stammered.

"Really?" I asked. "Is she hurt or something?"

The cat was scruffy and looked a bit dirty, but she didn't seem to have any visible injuries.

Of course, I'm not a vet or anything. She could have some kind of hidden injury like a fracture or internal bleeding or something. And then, it came to me.

"Maybe she's hungry."

I had a packaged chiffon cake with me that I had bought at a

convenience store. I opened it and broke off a small piece for the cat. After sniffing it for a second, she opened her mouth wide and devoured it whole.

"She ate it!" cried the girl. Her eyes started to twinkle.

It was such a pure, innocent reaction. Adorable.

Smiling, I handed a piece of the chiffon cake to her as well.

"Would you like some, too?" I asked.

She stared back at me with wide, disbelieving eyes, nodded meekly, and took the bite of cake.

"Mmm," she said, munching. "It's good."

As I drift back from that memory of our first meeting, I find myself again in front of my little Big, smiling as she drinks her coffee, tiny mouth stuffed full of sweet chiffon cake.

Chapter 11: Bittersweet

"You never put sugar or cream in your coffee," I observe.

"Adding sugar and cream to coffee is like putting salt and pepper on food," she explains. "If I get tired of the taste, I'll put it in. Usually though, I just want to enjoy it the way it is."

"I'm the type that adds both," I say, "since I don't really like the bitter taste of coffee. But you don't seem to mind bitter things, do you Big."

"I guess I don't mind them. But behold!! There lies a piece chiffon cake and coffee right in front of you."

Holding her coffee cup in her hand, she grins at me.

"In situations like these," she goes on, "you must savor the bitterness of the coffee and the sweetness of the cake together. It's a delightful combination like nothing else."

Sure enough, my sugar and cream?filled coffee just doubles the sweetness of the cake, creating a confused riot of sugar on my tongue.

"What I'm saying is that the universe is full of things that might exist

independently of one another but will never be complete on their own. By bringing them together, we can create an entirely new thing that is itself complete, perfect, and indivisible. Isn't it amazing?"

"You're getting pretty metaphysical on me, Big," I tell her, "but I think I get what you're trying to say. It's a metaphor for you and me, right?"

"If that's the case," she replies, "I'm definitely the chiffon cake."

Ha. Clearly she's the coffee.

And with that thought in mind, I plunk the rest of my cake in my mouth.

Everybody's got their own idea of what a cup of coffee needs.

Some prefer sugar and cream and some, like Big, would rather drink it black with a piece of chiffon cake.

And I'm sure there are plenty of people who just want the coffee by itself.

If someone simply gave me coffee, would I really need to add anything to it?

For me, coffee is an essential part of life. Is it really because of the sugar and cream?

Or because of the chiffon cake?

"Wow, that was delicious!" Big exclaims. "Honestly, I wasn't expecting much. But the coffee and the chiffon cake were both really good."

She puts down her empty coffee cup with a satisfied clink.

"I thought the same thing," I tell her. "I was pretty sure they were going to serve us something mediocre."

"Of course," Big adds, "nothing beats that chiffon cake we ate together when we first met."

"Actually, I got that one from a convenience store. But it still tasted great…I remember."

Following little Big's lead, I clink my coffee cup down on the table too.

"It's hard to beat the meow-vellous taste of your memories neow, isn't it?"

Right on cue, Katie appears the second we finish our meal.

Hands clasped at the chest and head tilted ever so slightly, she flashes us her kittenish grin.

"Well then, are you purr-eady to start the game?"

Chapter 12: The Game

"Honorable ladies and gentlemen!" Katie yowls, "I am purr-oud to purr-esent the first ever AKIBA Maid Caf? Quest! Get purr-eady for this heart-pounding, exciting, titillating game where you find your heart's desire and purr-esent it to your maid! Meeeyow!! Put your hands together neow!!"

Katie wriggles her hips as she holds a microphone she's plucked out of thin air.

Her fluffy hair is swishing everywhere too.

And of course this whole performance just showcases those incredibly bouncy, boingy, enormously huge tits of hers.

Watching my little Big stare so earnestly at them is pretty entertaining.

"This is a game for every Master and Mistress in the AKIBA maid cafe. Everyone must purr-ticipate! Are there any questions?"

"You haven't explained a single thing," I call out.

"Meow-ha-ha-ha! Purr-eow! You're a clever one, Master. Let me pat you on your little head, purr-ecious."

She actually pets my head with a little pat-pat-pat.

"Tsk" I was pretty sure I heard someone click their tongue nearby too, but I pretend not to. It's just too creepy.

"Masters and Mistresses, I will neow explain the rules of the quest!"

Katie thrusts her hand towards the sky.

The lights in the cafe dim, and she is instantly lit up under a bright spotlight.

What was this, some kind of cheesy TV show?

"The name of the quest tells mew everything about the game. Purr-etty simple, wouldn't mew say? No need for an explanation at all!"

The cat-eared girl goes on with a self-satisfied air.

I still have no idea what she was talking about.

"Masters and Mistresses, it's purr-fectly simple! All mew have to do is show your little Katie-chan what mew have been looking for here in AKIBA."

". . . . . ."

"Just call out 'Katie-chaaan' and I'll be there purr-ight away!"

". . . . . ."

"Then, your little Katie-chan will judge whether it's the thing mew were really looking for or not."

And with that, her face breaks into another huge Cheshire grin…as if there were nothing more to say.

I'm completely lost.

This whole thing is giving me a serious headache. Although that cat girl's the one that needs to have her head checked…

So many questions. Where to even start?

"So…" I begin, "you're assuming that we came here to find something?"

"Meowst definitely," she purrs back, bringing her face right up to mine.

Her gaze pierces right through me, as if she's reading my mind.

"Dearest Master, there is definitely something mew are looking for. Something you're missing. Something mew need. There's no doubt a-meowt it. Something you absolutely meowst have..."

"Let's just say I do," I offer. "That doesn't necessarily mean it's here in Akihabara."

"You may not find it in Akihabara," she purrs back, "but in AKIBA, Master, I assure you that mew can find anything at all!"

This cat girl is making absolutely no sense. Crazy things just keep coming out of her Cheshire mouth, hanging there like a crescent moon in the sky.

"…a place where mew can find anything you want…a place where there's so much to find, mew can't find anything at all…" she chants. "That's what AKIBA is, Master. The place called AKIBA…the town called AKIBA…the world called AKIBA!!"

Well, that's certainly what people say about Akiba. I always thought it was just a figure of speech though. Was I wrong?

It can't be literal…can it? Was I being naive?

Should I have paid closer attention?

I'm in a maid cafe…which has turned out to be some kind of Wonderland after all.

Maybe I just need to go with the flow.

Still, I'm better off asking a few pointed questions.

"How are you going to know whether the thing I bring you is what I really want?" I continue.

Katie seems completely unaffected by my accusing tone. Thrusting out her huge chest with grinning confidence, she replies, "A maid is supposed to know everything about her Masterrr!"

"Hey, you!"

Ignoring Katie and flashing me a look that says she's completely above this charade, my little Big waves at me to come closer.

I lean over the table, and she whispers in my ear.

". . . . . ."

"...why don't you ask her that?"

"Um…Miss Katie?" I ask. "Finding something means finding it by leaving this cafe, doesn't it."

"Purr-fectly correct!"

"So…we might just go straight home then. That's allowed too, right?"

"Purr-eow-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-ha-haaaaa!!! HAAA-HAAA-HAAA HAAA-HAAA-HA ha-haaaaa!!!"

She simply explodes into laughter. Hands crossed over her stomach guffawing, like she's just heard the funniest joke in her life.

It was a bit terrifying, actually. It didn't look like she could contain herself. Cackling and flashing her bright white teeth at us the whole time.

"Well I guess mew could, couldn't mew! I don't see a purr-oblem with it. If you can find the way!"

Chapter 13: The Reason

"Mew have only two hours! Mew-ve it then everyone, let's get started!"

And with that, Katie throws us out of the cafe.

Big and I trudge through the alley with all the electronics shops.

"What a load of shit," Big hisses.

"Not in a good mood, I see."

"I'm so pissed I could scream. That cat-eared bitch! She's probably laughing at me right now…like I'm some little girl who can't find her way home. Just because I look small doesn't mean I'm a damn child!"

That's what she was mad about?

"This is ridiculous," she goes on. "We're getting on the train and going home right this instant. I'm not a child. I'm a grown woman. And I remember the way we came."

But no matter which way we turned, we couldn't seem to reach

Akihabara Station.

We thought we were retracing our steps, but we eventually ended up right back at the AKIBA maid cafe.

We tried again, then again. All three times with the exact same result.

It's not like this was one of Big's clich? moments.
And this story was turning out to be anything but predictable.

In fact, we're finding ourselves in a completely unprecedented situation.

"Man," Big says, "I guess it's too late to say it now, but I really have a bad feeling about this."

"We're on the same page, Big," I assure her. "My alarm bells have been going off for a while now."

My little Big and I have gone on plenty of adventures together… exploring new places, taking trips…

We've certainly had our share of strange experiences.

"I'm pretty sure we're in a worst-case scenario here," she admits.

"I agree completely."

"If you can find the way…" Katie's warning was still ringing in my ears.

Were we trapped here then? Stuck in Wonderland forever?

"Oh, crap!" Big cries out. "I forgot to ask her something really important!"

She crosses her arms, gazing suspiciously back the maid cafe mansion.

"What's supposed to actually happen to us when we win or lose this game?" she asks out loud.

I stand there in silence.

Sure enough, Katie had never mentioned that.
Her whole explanation was really full of holes.
Was she purposely hiding something from us?

The game…
Katie's "quest" for us…

Did it mean that if we completed it we'd be able to get out of here?
That we'd be able to find our way back?
The game is supposed to be a quest to find what we are looking for.

I suddenly remember the conversation I had with Big yesterday.
Akihabara.

Where you can find almost anything you want.
Where there's so much to find, you might not find anything at all.
Where some go in and never come out.
A place that's like another world.
Like being lost in a dream…
AKIBA.

"Do you want me to call Katie?" I ask.

"No," Big answers, "I think we'd better not. Even if we asked her, she's not going to tell us anything she intends to keep hidden. And…"

"…and what?"

"Never mind."

And with that, my little Big starts walking away from the cafe.

"........."

Silently, I follow behind.

There must be some explanation for why we were led into this strange world.

Something that caused it.

A reason.

But what the hell could it be?

Chapter 14: The Loser

I was pretending to think hard about it, but the truth is I did have a pretty good guess about what that reason was. Still just a guess though.

Big.

Little Big.

My little Big.

The tiny girl walking ahead of me, not saying a word.

I call out to her nonchalantly.

"So Big…when we get back from this trip, it'll be time for you to graduate, huh."

"Why are you bringing that up all of the sudden?" she shoots back.

"No reason," I say. "It just popped into my head."

"The graduation ceremony. It makes me depressed just thinking about

it. You sure know how to put someone in a crappy mood, don't you."

"Don't you want to graduate?" I ask her.

"Nope."

She says it completely offhandedly, as if it hardly matters at all.

"I'm terrified of going to college. Once I leave there, I'll have to enter the hell of everyday adult life. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it so much I can't stand it! I'm so depressed, pessimistic, and scared that I feel like I'm drowning in darkness. My mind feels like it's going to be blown apart with the pain, the uncertainty, and the pointlessness of it all. I'm scared of college, I'm scared of the real world, and I'm scared of anything and anyone that might be waiting for me in my future life."

"But Big," I reassure her, "you don't have to work if you don't want to."

I know this, because she's the "Little Princess," and her family is loaded. She could easily live off their money for the rest of her life.

In fact, she never really had to go to high school…much less college.

"You know something? I hate it when things are just handed to me.

And these days, women have to work too in order to support a family. We sure as hell won't be able to make it on your salary."

She's talking like we're already engaged.

She lets out a little sigh and goes on.

"You want to know the truth? I wish I could stay in high school with you forever and just get carried away in romantic adventures."

That's it, then. I knew it.

AKIBA. Where some go in and never come out.

And here's my Big, talking as if she doesn't want to get out at all.

Saying she wants to keep everything just the way it is.

That's it then. I know why we're here now.

This has to be the reason we were led into AKIBA in the first place.

But I say nothing. I keep my thoughts to myself.

Even if it is though, I can't blame her for it. All of us get afraid of the

future at some point in our lives.

And, if her desire to stay with me is what got us into this mess, I don't regret it at all.

There is still no question that I'll follow her no matter what. That's just my fate.

Of course, just knowing what caused our situation doesn't help us win this game Katie forced us into. The quest to find the thing we're looking for.

Both little Big and I have been charged with solving this riddle. The biggest challenge is figuring out what we're looking for in the first place… not to mention actually finding those things.

We've been roaming around AKIBA for a good while now, but we still have no idea what they even are.

We're totally clueless.

"Hey Big," I call out. "We've been wandering around for half an hour now. What do you think we should do? Are you getting any ideas?"

"Nope. Nothing."

She replies so offhandedly that I wonder if she's even making an effort to think about it seriously. This is why I'm getting so worried.

"What if we just bring her some random thing?" I suggest.

"Humph," Big replies, "I guess we forgot to ask if we were allowed to use the trial-and-error method."

"Trial and error method?"

"I mean just keep trying things until we find the right answer," she explains. "Or is this game a one-shot deal?"

"Ah…that's definitely one worth asking about. I bet she'll answer it too, since it's a question about the rules. I'll call Katie then, OK?"

"Whatever, go ahead."

Clearly, Big doesn't want to have anything to do with the cat-eared girl.

Although, she's always been shy around people she doesn't know well. Maybe it's only natural.

Or she may just be jealous of Katie's enormous chest and avoids her

because of that.

"Miss Kaa-tiee," I call out.

She doesn't show up. I guess I just yelled out for nothing.

That's strange…it's not working…

"Katie-chaaan," I try again.

"Yes, Masterrr!"

Katie shows up with radiant smile, flashing us the peace sign at her cheek.

Come to think of it, she's kind of a pain in the ass.

"Yeah," I begin, "I have a question. Is it OK to ask you something?"

"I will answer mew if it is something I can answer," she replies.

Katie sticks out her tongue and gives us a wink.

"Can we keep showing you things we find until we get the right answer?" I ask.

"Ah, Master, mew cannot! You can only show me once…no more and no less. Purr-ease be very careful about what you select, so that mew won't regret it later…"

All of a sudden, a deep voice comes out of nowhere.

"Heeeey! Katie-chaaan!!"

When I turn around to see where it's coming from, I see a young man galloping toward us.

He's not that tall, and seems kind of lanky.

His hair is cut short and he's wearing silver-framed glasses. There's a scruffy five-o'clock shadow on his face.

He runs towards Katie, gasping for breath.

"Oh Master, mew are so out of breath," Katie purrs. "Easy now, easy. Take a deep breath. He-he-he. Meow-ha-ha…"

I'm about to make some snide comment about the guy, but then he starts this weird Lamaze breathing thing with Katie. I miss my chance.

"Phew! Thanks, Katie," he says. "So here you go, I found it! The thing I was looking for!"

The man produces a sheet of paper and presents it to Katie as if he's made the find of a lifetime.

He must have been one of the customers in the cafe when we were there. Katie has wrapped him up in her game too.

"So? What do you think?" he asks. "I've been looking for this forever! It's a real treasure! Ta-da!! The complete collection of every Chiyoko-tan candy wrapper design ever made…still sealed in the original packaging! Isn't it great?!"

Chiyoko-tan Chocolate is a candy company that was founded around the turn of the century…but that's hardly the point.

Katie stares intently at the sheet.

Her expression is so grave and unreadable that it's hard to believe she wore a dazzling smile just a few seconds ago.

"Meow-ha-ha-ha," she chuckles.

Her face slowly breaks into a smile again.

But this time, its clearly different.

Her eyes are dead serious.

It's an eerie smile.

A bone-chilling, stone-cold smile.

"So sorry, Master," she purrs ominously, "It's the wrong thing."

"What?! The wrong answer?!" he shouts. "No, it can't be! Why, Katie?" he stammers. "Wha…why?"

"What's wrong is wrong, Master. And wrong answers must purr-ay a penalty!!"

Katie raises her right palm and loads it up to hit the man.

"Master must be slapped for his punishment neow!"

...SMACK!!

The man's head flies off, cleanly severed at the neck.

Chapter 15: The Perfect Balance

The man's severed head lies on the ground, squashed like a paper bag.

Having lost consciousness, his body slowly teeters, spurting bright red blood from the neck. It finally collapses in a cloud of dust.

The moment he falls, Katie turns towards us as if she'd timed it precisely all along.

She looks at us dead on, lips curling into a wry smile.

Her frilly apron, once pure white, is now splattered with a grotesque red pattern.

My heart starts pounding.

Wait just a damn minute. What the hell was that?

My mind stammers in protest. But I can't unsee what I saw.

A person is now dead.

It seems like some crazy scene from a horror movie, but a man was actually just murdered before our eyes.

I feel a chill crawl up my spine. This can't be happening.

What am I supposed to do now?

What is there to do?

Should I try to escape?

Should I take little Big with me?

If that's the plan, I'd better act fast.

But…my feet! They won't move! I'm stuck!

"Just calm down…" Big speaks slowly.

Gently, she puts a tiny hand on my shoulder.

I can feel her little palm resting there, its tender touch spreading warmly across my back.

"I'm here for you. I'll always be by your side, OK? I'm your Big, and

I'm right here. Solid as a rock, brave as a lion. You don't have to be scared. Just relax. Don't lose your cool. Little Big's right here."

Her soothing voice and reassuring touch make everything melt away.

All my anxiety, tension, and fear…gone.

Sometimes I can be a coward. I can be weak. My resolve fails me. But my little Big always backs me up.

When it comes down to the wire and my courage fails, she's always there with kindness and support.

She always stands by me when I need it most.

"Meow-ha-ha-ha!"

Katie bursts out laughing, brilliant white teeth exposed.

There she is, smiling like an innocent child while her right hand hangs down next to her, soaked in a dead man's blood.

"Master and Mi'Lady, you are quite burr-ave after all! I thought mew might run away or start crying for help."

I ignore her comment. "Miss Katie," I ask her, "if we lose the game…I mean, if we find the wrong thing…you're basically going to kill us, right?"

"Well…" she hesitates, "that is not purr-cisely true."

Placing an index finger on her forehead, she goes on pensively.

"When mew lose your life in AKIBA, your body is lost…so mew do die in the real world," she explains. "But when mew die in the real world, your soul stays here in AKIBA forever and ever. Neverrr to perish!"

She grins, and then peering into my eyes, goes on.

"If mew cannot find what you are really looking for in AKIBA, mew will not find any meaning in life in the real world either. Isn't that right?"

Although she is smiling, her cold, stern words pierce my heart like daggers of ice.

I almost break down right there and then, but I manage to hold myself together.

"So what if we do find what we are looking for?" I ask.

"Then surely I will be purr-eased to show mew the way out of AKIBA!"

So that's it, then. We can go home when we find the right answer.

But our lives combined with chiffon cake…

"It may not be the purr-fect balance?"

Katie chimes in as if she's reading my mind.

"The impurr-tance of the chiffon cake depends on how mew look at it," she continues. "Which one carries more weight is up to mew, Master."

Like a child plotting mischief, Katie covers her mouth and giggles.

Weight? What does she mean by that?

"Well, well, mew still have one hour left! Better get mew-ving and find your treasure! Don't worry, when the time comes I will appear whether or not mew call!"

Katie turns around, crosses her hands at her back, and disappears into the alley full of gadgets and gizmos.

As soon as she is out of sight, Big lets out a sigh.

"What in the world have we gotten ourselves into?" she asks aloud. "You know…"

Her voice grows faint and sorrowful, like a murmur.

"…it's really a cruel game she's playing, trying to place a value on a person's memories. Don't you think?"

Chapter 16: Contemplation

"Finding something is like searching for your missing pieces. That's what I think."

Nearly an hour had passed since Katie left us.

We had been pacing back and forth through the alleys of AKIBA, thinking that was at least better than standing still.

But still no sign of our "missing pieces".

We were still clueless about what they even were.

At a total loss, I hear my Big break the silence…muttering quietly as if she were simply talking to herself.

"I look for something because I want it, because I don't have it, because I need it…because I am not yet satisfied. Because I lost it. Because it's a missing piece. A sweet chiffon cake finds its match in bitter coffee, and bitter coffee finds its match in sweet chiffon cake…"

She chats away calmly, hands clasped behind her back. Standing tall and confident, she looks around as if she can see right through the face of

the world itself. One foot in front of the other, Big walks ahead of me steadily, planting her steps firmly as we trudge on through the labyrinth.

Our missing pieces…

It's not that I don't think I have anything missing…it's just that I can't possibly think of what the missing thing might be.

Does my Big know what I need? Does she know what she needs?

Her monologue continues. "You may choose to add sugar or cream to bitter coffee, but who's to say that one choice is wrong and one is right? It's simply a matter of preference. I'm thinking that there is no single right answer to the game. Because unlike the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, human beings do not have a definite shape. The number of "missing pieces" that could fit is endless. And it's not just confined to tangible, physical things. Psychological pieces like feelings, relationships and concepts might give you the answer as well…"

And with that, Big stops dead in her tracks.

She slowly brings her feet together and shakes out her hair a bit. She turns to face me.

"You know," she says, "no matter how bitter my coffee is, it always

tastes delicious when I'm having fun with you."

Unselfconsciously, her face breaks open into a soft smile.

Big.

My little Big.

Despite her tiny little body, she is my whole world.

She speaks again. "I wonder what yours is. Of course, it's not mine to think about. You've got to figure it for yourself. It's something you have to find on your own."

She's talking like she's already found her answer.

And now it's up to me to find mine.

I've got to do it on my own, for myself.

Without counting on little Big to save me.

". . . . . ."

Big will graduate soon.

Then she's off to college.

I still have another year of high school to go.

A whole year without seeing her.

And who knows if I'll even end up at the same university after that.

When it comes down to it, I'm no star student. I'll do my best for sure, but who knows if it will be enough? Will I be able to keep up with her?

I can't just let my little Big lead me around forever. I've got to start taking charge of my own life.

Think.

Think.

Think.

Think.

Think.

"Meeeow!! Your time is up!!"

Chapter 17: Big

I feel a powerful force drive me forward.

Stumbling off balance, I fall face-first to the ground.

In an instant, like the final blow of an axe, a soft but heavy load drives me into the ground.

"Meow-ha-ha-ha!! Sitting on my Master feels so meow-vellous!!"

Katie. I'm being crushed under her voluptuous ass.

Not that Katie's a particularly large woman…she's just not nearly as small as my little Big.

I shouldn't have too much trouble throwing her off…

But I can't move an inch. It's like I've been lashed to the ground or tied up with ropes. Suddenly, Katie grabs me by the head.

Hard.

She thrusts it down with her hand like a cat toying with her prey.

"Mew couldn't find it after all, Master! Katie-chan is mewry mewry sad."

She's right. I failed.

I couldn't find what I was looking for.

My missing piece.

And now she's going to kill me.

Bullshit! This is ridiculous! I refuse to die, to be killed! Stay in AKIBA forever? No fucking way! I'll fight. I'll fight back, dammit!

But strangely enough, this wasn't exactly the reaction I had.

Thinking back, it probably would have been the better one.

Because that's what my little Big would have wanted to see.

Because she wants to be with me forever and ever.

And if that's the case, I'll bravely take it in stride. I'll stay in AKIBA with my Big until the end of time. Why not?

But just as I'm about to give in…

…SMACK!!

The light little pop takes a load off my shoulders.

Wait... What the…?

What is my body doing up there? What just happened?

Big's quiet, firm voice fills the air.

"Let him go, you cat-eared bitch."

I try to turn towards the sound, but all I can see are Big's ankles.

"Yeowch! What a naughty lady, Mistress, flinging your maid's arm away like that... Oh! I just realized! This is the purr-st chance Mi'Lady and I have gotten to speak together..."

"I'm shy around strangers. So I hate talking to new people. But that's beside the point. STAY AWAY FROM MY LITTLE, YOU HEAR ME?!"

"Meow-ha-ha-ha! Oh, so sorry Mi'Lady, there's nothing mew can do about it. My Master failed! He could not find what he was looking for. Mew don't have the power to move me an inch. This is Master's mess neow."

"Shut your face, you bitch."

Big's voice may have been quiet and quivering on the surface, but it was backed by a fierce power. The challenge was real.

This voice only comes out when Big is truly angry. It doesn't happen often.

…SMACK!!

Someone hits me in the head.

Probably Big.

"Huh?" I startle. "Why did you slap me?"

"Because you're so pathetic."

I can't see her face. She keeps talking.

"This sucks! You've been killed, and now we're trapped here forever and ever."

I try again and again to turn towards her. I still can't see her.

"We can't give up though. We have to find a way to keep going."

I could imagine her expression, though, from her quivering voice. It was the look of parched ground that had been flooded with water.

She had really kept it together until now.

Well…I guess that wasn't exactly true.

It may have looked that way, but most likely she was just barely holding it together.

My Big. Always minding her manners, always putting on a brave face.

But even Big has her limits.

"I don't know what our future holds," she says. "We'll need courage to keep going. And it scares me. I hate the idea of graduating from high school. But we have to push on. Because I do want to live to see my future. My future with you."

Ah. That's it!
Now I understand.
I had completely misunderstood her.

"So, what's your excuse?" she asks. "You just go along with

everything like it's fated. You never put up a fight. You say that you love strange experiences, but has it ever occurred to you that you can only have those experiences if you get up off your ass and go with me on all kinds of crazy adventures?"

I'd had it totally wrong. Big doesn't want to stay stuck at all!

Sure she's terrified of graduating…hates the idea.

But that doesn't mean her eyes aren't set on the future.

She may be scared and complain sometimes, but she's totally committed to moving forward. To taking one step at a time. To facing the future head-on.

"I hate seeing you like this," she says. "I just hate it."

Come to think of it, I'm the one that got us mixed up in this whole AKIBA mess in the first place.

For whatever reason, I've always counted on her to let me slide, to bail me out, to prop me up…to be my rock. And in the end all I've done is hide my true feelings from her.

Big's words come back to me.

I am a coward.

Who can blame her for calling me chicken shit?

The whole reason I met Big was because I was on an adventure, chasing after the unknown. Because I couldn't stand to be stuck in the same place all the time…because I was constantly wandering here and there.

And here I am unable to even let her know how I really feel. With my words or my actions.

I really can't blame her for hating me. But still…

"Big," I say.

I push the words out of my mouth.
I manage to string them together.
I don't want Big to hate me.

"Big, I also want to live to see our future together. I want to take that journey with you. To go on all kinds of adventures. It's going to be so lonely for me next year when you're gone. But I'm going to get through it. And when it's over, I want to be with you."

I'm doing it. I'm telling her. I'm…

"It's pathetic that I've ended up here flat on my face. It's an insult to you. You've always believed in me no matter what. You've never left my side. And I want to honor that. I refuse to let you down. I don't want you to

hate me! Because…"

I struggle to break free of this thing that's pinning me down, that's sapping my free will. I have to take back control!

"Because Big…"

I will my hands and feet to move, fighting to look up at her. I want to see her face.

I gather myself together and speak out loud and clear.

"Because I love you, Big!"

And instantly, the heavy load pinning me down disappears.

It's so sudden that it throws me off balance, and I once again stumble to the ground.

"Meow-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

Katie grins happily down at me lying face-up below her.

"Master, mew have found what you were looking for!" she announces. "Of course, you're way past your time limit so I shouldn't allow it but…I just feel like giving you a purr-etty kitty-cat maid bouncy boingy bonus!" "Purrr-eow!"

"Kittens are such fickle creatures, they say," Katie purrs as she sticks out her tongue. Reaching out a hand, she helps me back up.

"Mi'Lady had what she was looking for the minute she stepped into AKIBA, and my Master seems to have found his as well. That means both of mew have completed your quest here…congratulations!" And with that, she bursts into a little clap.

We don't join her.

But what does she mean…Big already had what she was looking for?

And I still haven't found a thing since I've been here. As far as I know anyway…

"Well neow," Katie announces, straightening her apron, "allow me to escort mew back home!" She bows deeply. As she does, I see a second tail…this one a different color than the first…pop out from under her frilly apron.

"Thank you for visiting the AKIBA maid cafe! We hope to see mew again soon. It was such a purr-easure serving you as your maid. Kitty maid Katie-chan of the Kitty Cat Caf?, signing off!"

In an instant, the sky changes color.

The entire scene begins to dissolve and shift.

People start walking by.

Young girls in cosplay outfits hand out fliers to passersby.

Anime shops and gadget stores line the streets.

Akihabara.

With Katie nowhere in sight.

Standing next to me, though, is Big.

My little Big.

"Whoa, we're finally back!" she cries out.

Yep…same as always.

Big assumes her usual air…nose ever so slightly raised, fully conscious of being a year older than me, and smiles. Her look says it all, and I finally breath a sigh of relief.

"Well then," she says, "I guess it's time to go home."

Chapter 18: Homeward Bound

Tiny, twinkling eyes. Two tiny hands clasped together. Opening her tiny kitten mouth, my little Big begins to speak.

"If you could choose between a girl with big breasts or a girl with small breasts, which would it be?"

There are just a few dark hours left as our little trip draws to a close. The bullet train rushes forward, hurdling through time and space with laser-like precision. This is the train that will carry me and my little Big home.

Sitting next to me, she poses the same question as the day before.
But this time, I give her a straight answer.

"I love a girl with tiny tits."

My answer seems to satisfy her, and she settles back into her seat with a nod. I'm no fortuneteller, but I'm pretty sure those little boobs of hers aren't going to grow bigger any time soon.

But I have to keep my thoughts to myself. One slip of the tongue, and she'd grate my head like a radish on her washboard chest.

I do love big tits, you know.

There's a world of difference between big boobs and small ones. Even the thought of comparing them is ridiculous.

But…

That has nothing to do with my little Big.

She's the one I love.

"You really didn't like that Katie, did you," I say.

"Meh," she replies.

As if she couldn't care less about it.

Is she joking?

"It's just that when I tried to call her," I explain, "the look on your face said you didn't want anything to do with her."

"It was just lame the way you thought we could count on her."

She tossed off the comment as if it hardly mattered at all.

But I can understand why she's acting that way.

She's just trying to put me in my place, being a year older and all.

She wants to revel in it.

That's Big's pride talking.

She always wants to carry herself a certain way.

I speak up. "After all we've been through, Big, what was it I was looking for, anyway?"

"What?!" she fires back. "Why are you asking me?"

I guess she's right. It's not really the kind of thing you should be asking someone else.

In any case, I think I already have the answer. Deep inside, I know.

There's no point in even saying it, really.

Just like the thing little Big has found.

In fact, we had our "missing pieces" before this journey even began.

They're the kind of answers a person doesn't need to travel anywhere to find.

"Look at this train car," Big says. "Everybody's dozing off. They look dead tired. We should really stop talking and let them get some rest."

My Big always knows when to mind her manners.

That is, except for randomly asking people about boobs.

"But like the saying goes," Big adds, "it ain't over till the fat lady sings. We'll be in trouble if we nod off and miss our stop. We can't let

ourselves fall asleep too."

Just as I'm about to tell her that I'd already thought of that, I look over and see Big snoozing away.

That was quick.

She definitely knows how to embrace a clich?.

And this story can only end one way.

". . . . . ."

I reach over and pinch her tiny cheek.

It's so soft and springy.

But she doesn't react at all. She must be out like a light.

With a small sigh of relief, I settle back into my seat.

Graduation.

My Big will be graduating in no time.

But I'm going to be all right.

My little Big has faith in me.

I won't let her down.

Meanwhile, I'll be looking forward to the day when little Big and I can go off on our adventures together, exploring the unknown.

This time, though, I'll be the one that takes the first step.

Reaching out, I take my little Big's hand in mine.

Afterword

True communication is simply impossible without language. There is just no way to get your meaning across by remaining silent. While some people are exceptionally sensitive and have the ability to read unexpressed emotions and thoughts, the majority of people will never be able to really understand you without words.

Put another way, this means that without words, there is no real communication. You may think in your head, "that person's a piece of shit," for example, but unless those words come out of your mouth it's unlikely that they'll ever know it. Personally, I think if someone's being a bonehead, you should just go ahead and say it. Of course, that's not always possible given everything we have to take into account in our daily lives. Oftentimes there are so many factors to consider that being that straightforward isn't really an option.

So society does put some restrictions on what we can and can't say. I've been trying to be mindful of that lately. At the same time though, it's not healthy to keep bottling everything up. I often find someone I think I can spill my guts to, but the minute they're in front of me get caught up in how they might react and only ever get a third of it out. What they get is just a faint whisper of what I really wanted to say.

The problem with keeping everything in is that positive feelings like

gratitude get trapped inside along with everything else. I often find myself lowering my head in embarrassment just trying to get out the words "thank you". I'm not a great speaker, so actually talking about what I feel is not easy for me. I much prefer to type it or write it instead. I'm envious of people who can simply let out whatever's inside them.

This novel is a story about a narrator who knows he won't be able to communicate unless he puts his feelings into words, but somehow he just can't do it and gets stuck in indecision. This character is pretty sure that his Big knows how he feels, but he also knows that she wants to hear him actually say it.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the editors of impress Quickbooks and to Mr.Suzuki for their kind assistance and guidance. Chiwawa Iwasaki, my illustrator, has created an adorable look for my female characters Katie and Little Big. It's hard to express the depth of my gratitude to them. I would also like to thank my friends for sticking by me and my family for always being there when I need them.

Most of all, my heartfelt thanks go out to everyone who takes the time to read this novel.

As a side note, this novel was originally published as one of the winners of the AKIBA PC Hotline Award, so the main setting was supposed to be in Akihabara. In fact, most of it takes place in AKIBA, which is a parallel dimension to Akihabara according to the story. At any rate, both Akihabara and AKIBA are purr-fectly strange worlds, don't mew think?

About the Author

I go by the name "Maho".

I write novels and I also program video games.

I like to entertain people, and love to see them enjoying my work. I also love going out and sharing a drink with my friends.

My hope is that something I create might inspire someone or help them move forward in their life.

You can follow me on Twitter at @mahoge_maho

Message from the Translators 1: Dawn Croft

This is a story about one person's struggle to speak out and find his authentic voice. Though it is played out in the drama between a teenage boy and his year-older crush, lost in a parallel dimension to the already-otherworldly Akihabara in faraway Tokyo, the struggle itself is one that is both universally common and deeply resonant within all of us. In a sense, we all find ourselves inexplicably locked into the kind of quest with which Big and the narrator are charged: finding what truly has meaning for us in this often chaotic, often whimsical, often tragic and incomprehensible life.

As in the story, the reward for finding that "missing piece" is nothing less than our freedom?the freedom to escape the confused muddle of superficial, everyday drama and "come home" to who we really are and what we're really meant to do with our lives. Finding peace in this certainty then allows us to reach out and offer genuine love to the people we care about, as the narrator does when he reaches out for Big's hand at the end of the tale.

Ultimately, finding our authentic "voice" allows us to go beyond even our personal circle and contribute something meaningful to the wider world around us. This is the freedom, as our hero and heroine eventually find, to stride boldly into the uncertainty of our futures with a sense of confidence, courage, curiosity, and delightful adventure.

On the other hand, the cost of losing this game is no less than the kind

of endless, wandering confinement that Katie pronounces on the poor man with his precious chocolate wrappers?a man who tries to fill his longing for authenticity with shallow, meaningless trinkets from the outside world. We may go on living and breathing without a deeper purpose in our lives, but as the capricious cat-girl?wise and unpredictable and maddening as Fate herself?proclaims, if we cannot find what we are looking for in the inner world (of commitment, of desire, of authentic selfhood and contribution) we will never find any meaning in the "real" world either. Our souls will be forever condemned to wander endlessly in search of the pieces that make us whole.

Underneath its exceptional characters and fantastical settings, this is truly a profound and universal story made even more meaningful by the combined effort taken to communicate and adapt it to an international audience. Its author, Maho, had to find his authentic voice in getting the images and inspiration for the story out onto paper in a clear, compelling way; the publishers at impress QuickBooks had to find a way to get that story out to readers all over Japan; the project managers at Conyac had to find the right translators to convert the Japanese language, expressions, and tone into authentic, engaging English prose; and the publishers at impress QuickBooks had to again push that translation out to readers worldwide. What started as a flash of an idea in Maho's head is now in the hands and hearts of people around the globe, entertaining them and inspiring them to find their own calling?to write their own authentic life stories as well.

And if that isn't an example of finding one's true voice, I don't know what is. It has been a privilege and a joy to be a part of this transformative process and I deeply hope, in our own authentic missions as translators, that we have been able to serve as conduits to spread Maho's contributions far and wide.

Message from the Translators 2: Susumu Fukuhara

How do people outside Japan get to know about Japan? Some people associate Japan with Hayao Miyazaki's animation films*1, while others might point to Kurosawa*2 or Godzilla*3 films. Some people are even unaware that these works have anything to do with Japan. My guess, however, is that most readers who pick this book have a keen interest in Japan and Japanese language.

Japanese people get to know about Western novels and films through English-Japanese translation, and some of the translated books even become the bestsellers*4. But can you come up with any book translated from Japanese to English that has recorded huge sales in your country? It seems that with the exception of some popular works such as those by Haruki Murakami*5 or Pokemon comic books*6, the vast majority of such translated materials never even come close.

Actually, the history of Japanese-to-English translation is very short. Exceptionally great translation works of that sort have been done by some great minds who perfectly understand both Japanese language and Japanese culture. One such person is Edward G. Seidensticker, one of the students in U.S. Navy Japanese/Oriental Language School*7 in Colorado who was given a special mission to decode Japanese military messages during the Second World War. After the war, he introduced to the English-speaking world great literary works by Yasunari Kawabata, Yukio Mishima, and

Junichiro Tanizaki. Ironically, those who mastered Japanese to defeat the Japanese army ended up leading the way in bridging the cultural barriers between Japan and the United States. Then why aren't there that many successful Japanese native translators? While Japanese people study English very hard, even the college students who are supposed to understand English well have a hard time translating even a few lines of Japanese into English. One of the reasons is that they get stuck with the many Japanese words which are difficult to translate into English equivalents.

A glance at one sentence from the original Japanese text of this book will demonstrate this translation challenge.

Original Japanese Text

> なんか先輩はネコミさんを苦手としている節があるんだよなぁ。"(Chapter 14)

English Translation

> Clearly, Big doesn't want to have anything to do with the cat-eared girl.

Japanese word 苦手 (nigate) is a hard word to put into English. How it is translated largely depends on the way it is used. Unless you analyze the concept, know how it is being used in the context of the conversation, and know an English expression used in similar situations, you will not come up with a proper translation at all. Knowing the dictionary equivalent is only the tip of the iceberg.

Another example is the debate over how to put the Japanese word 先輩 (senpai) into English. As far as I know, in English there is no concept that matches this Japanese word. Dawn-san solved this problem by giving the petite girl one year senior to the narrator the nickname "Little Big". The original Japanese text has many, many such words and expressions. The Conyac and Impress team have made an excellent translation team to tackle such a difficult mission. This work has given me the courage to inch forward as the narrator of this book might have done.

Special thanks to the Conyac team who gave me the opportunity to be a part of such grand project, and Dawn-san for her excellent proofreading and editing work. Without the experienced team at Conyac, I could have never completed such long Japanese-English translation. Thanks to Jack-san and Teki-san of the Conyac team for their kind support and encouragement. And thank you especially to Maho-san, who created a great story with excellent characters?the indecisive high school boy, Big, and Katie (who is called Nekomi-san in the original text). Thank you also to Chiwawa-san for the excellent illustrations. Also special thanks to my parents, my brother, and my sister who support me both emotionally and financially.

Notes:

1. Hayao Miyazaki is one of the most successful animation film directors of all time. His works include "Spirited Away", "My Neighbor Totoro", and "Princess Mononoke".

2. Akira Kurosawa is one of the most successful Japanese film directors. He was a great influence on Hollywood filmmakers including Steven Spielberg.
3. Godzilla is a popular monster film series started in 1954. This film also made great influence to Hollywood film makers.
4. Translated works represent one of the most popular categories in the Japanese book market. So much so that most of the top-level translators in Japan prefer English-to-Japanese translation rather than Japanese-to-English translation. In the Japanese translation community, Japanese-to-English translation is typically limited to business or technical translations.
5. Haruki Murakami's IQ84 series is one of the most well-known translated book series originally written by a Japanese author.
6. Pokemon is noted for being one of the most successful video game series of all time, featuring the adorable mascot character Pikachu. Its toy franchise items and TV animation series are also popular.
7. Another notable U.S. Navy Japanese Language/Oriental Language School graduate is Donald Keene, who has written many important books about Japan and Japanese literature.

Susumu Fukuhara

Standard translator (English to Japanese, Japanese to English) at Conyac, and National Licenced Guide (English).

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Translator:Dawn Croft, Susumu Fukuhara
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